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Some Religious Aspects of Positivism.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE

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BY THE

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Some Religious Aspects of Positivism.

I OUGHT to apologise for venturing to read a paper to you on the subject of Positivism, as I must confess at starting that I have read none of Comte's own works. My excuse can only be (1) that I have had several opportunities lately of hearing or reading some of the chief utterances of English Positivists, so that I may hope not to misrepresent them; (2) that your President pressed me to read a paper on some subject; and (3) that I had found on several occasions in talking with undergraduates lately that the subject was one about which they were interested and anxious. I hope, then, that I may not be doing wrong in trying to initiate a discussion on the subject to-night. I will try to put before you shortly a statement of what Positivism aims at doing in the religious sphere; then to see what are the strong points of it; lastly, what are the points in which it seems specially open to criticism.

The point at which we can start best is perhaps to remind ourselves of the fact that Positivism represents a reaction against the theories of the French Revolution. Comte was born in 1798, and died in 1857. The Philosophy of the 18th century, which based all knowledge only on the sensations of the individual, and which pointed

out to man as his ideal an imaginary Law of Nature, under which all men were equal, had just broken out into the excesses of the Revolution, and the aim of all thinking men of the time was to revive some social organization which should control the individual by his voluntary submission to it. The old order seemed to be breaking up, and the object was to supply a new order, which should control anarchy by organizing a perfect society. In order to do this, Comte seems from the first to have seen that it was necessary to have a religion. And his conception of religion is a high conception. Religion is with him a state of moral health; while the absence of it is a state of disease^a: it is "a harmony"—a power which makes man at one with himself by subordinating his whole nature to one ruling tendency—"the perfect unison between man's intellectual convictions and his affective nature—both being devoted to a wisely ordered activity"; and further it is a power which makes him at harmony with other men, and in harmony with the world around him. Religion is "emotion inspired by knowledge into action." It is to secure alike personal unity and social unity.

Such is the aim: how is it to be acquired? Looking at the history of mankind, Comte argues that

^a "Toutes (réligions) même les plus imparfaites sont préférables, quand elles rallient, au scepticisme dispersif." And again: "L'irréligion est l'état de maladie, de perturbation de l'unité. ... Il y a le côté intellectuel qui consiste à ne pas reconnaître la subordination de la vie humaine envers une puissance supérieure. ... Il y a le côté morale, c'est à dirè, la prédominance permanente ou alternative de quelqu'un ou de quelqu'uns des penchants égoïstes." (Comte.)

man is divided between two tendencies—a strong selfish instinct making him care for himself, and a weak social tendency making him subordinate himself to others; and it is obvious that his happiness has been secured whenever the latter has triumphed over the former. But how is this triumph to be secured? Hitherto it has been secured by belief in God, in a strong power outside man who is on the side of unselfishness. First, the heathen had his fetich; then came polytheism; then the highest form of monotheism—one God controlling and directing all the world, and to this man's heart could *bow*. But unfortunately his intellect rejects such a Being now. For men's minds have passed through three stages of growth in this matter: first, the theological stage, in which separate Gods or one God were supposed by acts of their personal will to direct each event; then such arbitrariness was denied, and there followed the metaphysical stage, in which men attributed such power to abstractions, such as a first cause; and, finally, even that broke down, and then came the positive stage, in which men acknowledge that they cannot know God or first causes, but only can know phenomena, actual facts and the laws which regulate them. God cannot be known: we can only know facts. But what then are we to worship? The mere observance of external *law* might evoke our submission: it could not evoke our love; and would only make religion an obedience of irresistible fatalism.

The intellect and the heart are at variance: how are they to be reconciled? This Comte thinks

he has performed by discovering that the realm of law exists not only in lower inorganic nature, but in human life; the study of history reveals a growth, a progress in humanity; the actual efforts of real living men in the past have constituted laws; they have shewn, for instance, that "to live for others" is the true source of happiness; "Humanity" then is a living power, which has been controlling men, controlling nature to man's use, overruling history; and so it is a power which can not only excite our submission, but our love, and which at the same time calls forth all our activities, because even yet it has not attained its perfection: there is much yet to be done to make human life perfect. The principle of Positivism as a religion is therefore Affection—living for others: the foundation of it is *order*,—obedience, that is, to the laws of Nature as revealed by Science: the end of it is progress, the perfection of human life. The powers which act upon each man are also three-fold: first, there is the family in which the child gets his first training; in it the woman, the noblest part, becomes the servant of the whole, and she in her turn becomes the object of worship, whether as wife, mother, or daughter: next, the city controls men's common life, and duty to it carries on the work of self-subordination: finally, the Church presides over all, and its priests direct the activities of the whole body, and organize the worship which is devoted to the whole spirit of Humanity, past, present, and future.

The religion as organized at the end of his life by Comte is most elaborate, and is an almost

absurd travesty of Catholicism : it has its Calendar, its Pontiff, its Trinity, its Madonna, its seven Sacraments, its method of crossing itself, and many other minutiae ; but these are not necessary for our purpose. I have said enough to shew what is the main principle of the religion ; how it professes to rest simply upon ascertainable facts, the lives of the great and good of the past and the spirit that animates them, and gains its strength and inspiration from meditation upon these lives. I will read two extracts from Positivist writers, in order to avoid any danger of misrepresentation.

“This new science reveals to us the laws of a Force towards which we can feel the highest sense of Sympathy, to whose service we can devote ourselves, whose mighty Power over us we cannot gainsay, whilst we must accept it with Love and Reverence. That Force is the vast and overwhelming consensus of all human lives, the complex movement through the ages of human civilisation and thought. Before this crucial discovery of human Intelligence it was impossible to feel that the truths of science and our noblest sympathies had a common object or field. One might wonder at the Firmament of Stars and delight in our study of the Planets ; but it was idle to love the Planets, or to feel ourselves inspired by the Milky Way. It was marvellous to track the secrets of electricity, or the analysis of gases ; but the lives of men and women were never ordered by profound affection for electricity or gas. The study of all the forms of life upon the earth enlarged our minds, and the physiology

of the human frame shewed us how fearfully and wonderfully we are made; but no man could love the Vegetable or Animal kingdoms as a whole. Nay, Anatomy, or even Vivisection itself, were not found altogether conducive to a reverential and sympathetic state of Mind.

“But when we passed into Social Science and found how all the other sciences had their issue and meaning in the Science of Man, when we found how they all served as the instruments and materials for the glorious human Fabric, when we learned how the long succession of ages had developed man’s mind and powers, how civilisation was advancing with sure and widening progress, how the efforts of the human race stood round each of us from the cradle to the grave, how the thoughts of the wise, and the works of heroes, and the influence of every noble life made us what we are—then we felt at last that the Realm of Law was become the Realm of Love. There was now a human Providence which watched over us, taught us, guided us, ruled us; there was a supreme Power which we might serve, but which we could not contend with; there was a Cause to which to devote our lives, and which could inspire all the warmth of our souls. That cause was the onward march of the human race, and its continual rising to a better mode of life^b.”

And, again :

“By thought and by feeling we seek to enter into the presence of that assemblage of noble lives, who, from the earliest ages until now, have

^b Science and Humanity, by F. Harrison, p. 23, 24.

laboured for the benefit of men, and have left a store of material and spiritual good, from which all the blessings of our present life have issued. Before the resistless power of this unseen host we bow in thankful submission; knowing well that of ourselves we are insufficient, either to see or to do what is right. Whatever wider thoughts or generous impulses prompt us to rise above ourselves, and to live unselfishly, come to us from a higher source. They are the free gift of Humanity.

“We commemorate, therefore, with thankful hearts the service rendered by the countless generations of men, from the earliest ages till now, who lived and died unknown, but whose labours are our inheritance; the love that bound them to a common hearth; the loyalty that knit them together in danger; the gentle courage that brought the higher animal races into friendly service; the subtlety of hand and eye that mastered the first arts of peaceful union; the simple beliefs that fostered the first germs of reverence: for these things are at the root of human progress, the starting-point in the struggle upwards to a higher life^c.”

These quotations will shew the real strength and importance of this religious power. And perhaps we may say that the chief point which we should single out for praise is *its high conception of religion*, that harmony of all man's powers, and of man with

^c Prayer and Work, by J. H. Bridges, p. 4, 5.

all around him^d: and this grandeur of conception is gained in three ways:

(i) It insists that religion shall be a thing BASED ON FACTS, moulding this life, and not a mere aspiration about a future world. This is surely of the very essence of the Gospel message: "This *is* eternal life to know Thee the only God, &c.;" "The kingdom of Heaven *is* come among you;" and the like. It is almost marvellous how men of the ability of these writers wholly misunderstand Christianity in this way. No doubt much of the blame must be laid upon our own misrepresentation of it; and yet, when we have made all allowances, it is hard to be patient with such a caricature as this: "Theology says (and it may say truly) its Principle too is Love. Yes! it is the Love of God. But there it stops. It does not pretend to say that its *Foundation* is *Order* (i.e. positive knowledge of real things), still less can it say its *End* is *Progress*—physical, material, intellectual, as well as moral, progress. It can only ejaculate that its foundation is a Divine Order, a thing ever shifting, vague, and purely hypothetical; its end is a transcendental Progress to a supersensuous crown of glory. To positive science, to practical human improvement, it has nothing whatever to

^d "The intellectual side includes the adequate conception of the general laws of physics, of life, of society, to which our feelings and our actions are subordinated. The moral part by discipline, regulates our conduct at once public and private, and under the shape of worship guides and intensifies our feelings." Westcott: The Gospel of the Resurrection—Appendix, (in which will be found a very sympathetic account of the religious sides of Positivism.)

say, except "set not your thoughts and affections on this world." In doing this, Theology withdraws from human nature. It says to the heart, Worship, love, obey. To the Intellect, to the Character, it has nothing to say at all, but a pious hope that they will both act to the honour and glory of God: and both put their own interpretation on that^e."

(ii) This grandeur is also gained by the insistence on the need of *knowledge*; treated as a religious act, and a necessary condition of real religious work. "Society cannot be touched without knowledge."

(iii) It emphasizes the social character of religion. Here perhaps we are most to blame, for our misrepresentations of Christianity. In the autumn I heard Dr. Congreve lecture on Positivism, and he then stated that the reason why Christianity must fail to meet the needs of the present age was, that its message was simply that of a personal salvation given by a personal Saviour. Now no doubt Christianity proclaims that, and so preserves the eternal individuality of each life in a way in which Positivism does not. But at the same time how little is this a full representation of Christianity! for how does the individual get his salvation? Only by incorporation into a body, into the Church: he is only one member of a large whole, and gets his full life only when that has its full life, suffering when it suffers, and rejoicing when it rejoices. It may be said that the Church is a narrow exclusive body; but this

^e Science and Humanity, p. 10.

again is surely a misunderstanding. The Church is essentially Catholic; that is to say, it is as wide as Humanity, and is open to all men who submit to the necessary purification which human nature requires for its perfection; and it is never satisfied until it has become Catholic. In respect of *mere external Communion* the Church as a body is at least far wider than Positivism as a body. In respect of sympathy with goodness and truth outside that body, the Church is exactly in the same position as Positivism; she recognises all elements of good in heathen religion, sympathizes with them, draws inspiration from them, and holds out the ideal that all alike will hereafter be united in one fold under one Shepherd.

But while this is so, we must confess that this side of teaching has been much ignored in England, and that we need to make our teaching more definite about the Saints, as stimulating sources of strength and life to us; and about the Church, as a great body moving onward, drawing in all that is good and consecrating it, and sweeping it on to ultimate harmony and perfection. Further, we need to emphasize what St. John meant by the doctrine of the Word, and St. Paul by insisting on the Pre-existence of Christ and his work in Creation; viz. that there was in all life, all development of human nature, an underlying work of God, which is not in antithesis to, but only culminates in, the Incarnation.

But I must pass to the points where it seems to me Positivism lies most open to criticism.

(i) On the intellectual side. The law of the three stages is one point. That has often been

criticised as really a confusion: it does not represent three distinct epochs of time: it really represents three aspects of looking at the world—the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific,—all of which have always existed side by side, and which do not exclude each other; nay, rather the conception of God and the metaphysical unity of thought and its object has grown fuller instead of weaker with the revelation of law. To discover law is not to lose sight of God.

Further, Comte's own religion is itself inconsistent with the law and his own philosophical position. He rejects the knowledge of God, because we can only know phenomena; but he himself adds to the phenomena an abstraction of his own. The mere idea of "humanity" is never revealed to us by the senses: it is not a phenomenon; it is an abstraction, an idea read into the facts by his own mind. Further, the idea of "progressiveness" in humanity, that again is an idea supplied by himself. We do not indeed find fault with his action; it is the legitimate function of the mind; but we say that it is inconsistent with his own principles. Once again, his theory has this drawback—that it leaves humanity dissociated from external nature: he regards external nature as a fatal environment which men have to struggle against, and he invokes poetry to revive the old belief in human feelings animating nature. We, on the other hand, carry on the legitimate function of the mind: we are conscious of our power of knowing nature as well as humanity: we imagine that this power implies some ground of union between us and the objects

of our knowledge ; and in this underlying principle, animating and uniting all the universe, we see God's will.

Christianity, no less than Positivism, aims at producing a harmony between man and his environment ; but it is more logical, because it assumes a common principle in both, while *mere* Humanity stands apart from the Cosmos^f.

(ii) This first point of criticism is one which requires some philosophical training to appreciate : the next is one which is simpler, and yet it seems to me equally strong. It is this : the treatment of Jesus Christ. Here Positivism is condemned by its own principles : it professes to worship all that is great in Humanity : it denies that there is a God, so that Jesus Christ on its principles must have been purely human ; and certainly it cannot be denied that He has had, and has now, more influence upon the progress of Humanity than any one other man ; and yet He is not included in the Positivist Calendar. St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, all these are ranked before Him, as well as all the founders of other religions. The pretext is of course that St. Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity ; but what a condemnation such a judgment is of the system ! Any Positivist to whom I have spoken has admitted that Comte was wrong ; but if so, what a failure ! how can we trust the methods and the systems which, when applied to so crucial a test, produce so perverse a result ? Certainly, whatever truth

^f Comte's intellectual inconsistency is ably treated by Prof. Caird in the *Contemporary Review* for May, June, July, Sept. 1878.

there is in Positivism, it will have entirely to modify its attitude to Jesus Christ; and we Christians must be helping on the cause of truth, by insisting on His supreme claims upon the worship of mankind.

(iii) There is another point which is drawn out fully by Dr. Abbott (Through Nature to Christ, c. iii.) in connexion with Christ, and that is the absence of any test by which to decide what part of Humanity we are to worship. Evidently, we do not worship all Humanity; we need some test. "If we are to worship Humanity, we are not to be expected to worship Humanity cannibalizing, or oppressing, or retrograding, or stagnating; the object of our worship is clearly to be Humanity progressing." But then we need a test; each individual worshipper needs some test simple and clear. To take one instance, which is perhaps helpful. At the time of the Crucifixion, what was the true object of worship to those round the Cross? was it humanity crucifying, or was it the Crucified? and, if the latter, does not He supply us with a test, which Humanity does not give?

(iv) Positivism may be charged with *ignoring* parts of human nature. I do not see what its teaching is about sin and the need of atonement: it ignores again all the instincts which point to a conscious life beyond the grave. It claims indeed to be more unselfish than Christianity, because its idea of immortality is "subjective"; i. e. it exists only in the result of our own lives as affecting the future progress of Humanity, and as living enshrined in the memory of others. All of you will remember George Eliot's beautiful expression

of this hope. But such an immortality is equally selfish with the Christian idea, if it is regarded as administering to one's own self-satisfiedness[§]. Really either hope is equally unselfish; but the Christian satisfies our instincts more thoroughly, and corresponds to all the analogies which this life affords, in which, after every act of self-sacrifice, our life remains, not only in its influence on others, but also in a consciousness of its own existence stronger than before. In other words (to borrow from Professor Westcott), while the Positivist ideal of life insists on the need of totality, continuity, and solidarity,—that is to say, that no life can be complete unless all its parts are developed with relation to the whole of the universe, unless it recognises its debt to the past and its connexion with the life of all other men,—the Christian ideal adds the further need of infinity. Besides, it must be remembered, when we estimate such hope of immortality as a stimulus to action, that science prevents us from looking to the everlasting progress of Humanity, because it foretells the destruction of the earth; so that men are far less likely to worship an object which may cease at any day, than one which is infinite and can survive the destruction of its present environment.

These are some of the points which I hope may lead to discussion. Practically, where Positivism is positive it is a gain, a new reading and emphasizing of much that was in Christian theory. Where it is *negative* there it fails, and shews an ignorance

[§] See the Sermon on Eternal Life in Prof. Mozley's University Sermons.

of the capacities of human powers. It says, you cannot know God: we say, the human mind can know such an abstraction as Humanity, and logically it is quite as easy to believe in knowing the wider abstraction—God. It says, God cannot interfere with law: we say, partly, that we do not wish Him to, that we can trace and submit ourselves to Him when working through Revealed laws; partly, that what we see in Nature is not so much fixed law, as the subordination of one law to others, and that consistently with this God can take up and control all lower laws to minister to men's spiritual welfare; He can even enable man to break with the past, with the laws of sin which were binding him, and start anew under the operation of a new spiritual law called into operation by the unique Personality of Christ.

To sum up, the strength of Positivism lies in this, that it supplies a motive *apparently* more *tangible* than God; but it is weak, inasmuch as that motive has not the intrinsic power (through failing in infinity), nor the same unlimited extent as that of God. As yet the power of its motives has not been tested: its followers are people who have inherited a morality which is the outcome of Christian motives: what the result will be when the ideas of God and of personal immortality are generally broken down, the future alone can shew.

It contains no new truth: all that is new is the *denial* of parts of what we accept as truth, and so it does compel us to see that our religion is not narrow, but all-embracing: it does compel us to look to the questions *which it denies*, the

possibility of knowing God and of His working miracles; and while these can be answered partly on intellectual grounds, still the chief answer will be that of Christian lives; if they know the influence of the Spirit blowing where it listeth, they will provide the surest argument for ourselves and for others.





